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Art Against War

Art against war art is a latecomer to the history of western art. The earliest examples of visual depictions of human conflict can be found in prehistoric cave dwellings, such as the battle scenes at Morella la Vella in Spain (ca 3000 B.C.E.), whereas the first clear case of a European artist condemning war appears only in 1633, with the publication of Jacques Callot's series of etchings *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*. The fact that so much war art is now anti-war testifies to the shift in attitudes to conflict that has occurred since the seventeenth century, but particularly over the past 150 years. At the moment, it is difficult, even unhelpful, to differentiate anti-war art from war art per se; art that promotes war would be the more contentious category.

Yet if we look back across the *longue durée* of the European peace movement, something more like a distinctive tradition of art against war begins to emerge.¹ It is a tradition in T.S. Eliot's sense of a conversation, a process of reiteration, paraphrase and response that inflects our reading of the earlier image, as well as of the later.² It coalesces around certain iconic statements such as Goya's series of prints *The Disasters of War* (1810-20, first published 1863, illus. 1), Picasso's painting *Guernica* (1937, illus. 2), and Nick Ut's photograph *The Terror of War* (1972, illus. 3). It reuses and reinterprets their imagery and techniques to suggest a recurring cycle of violence, connecting disparate times and places.

Amongst the multiple preoccupations of anti-war art: its emphasis on grotesque mutilation (Goya, Grotz); its attention to individual suffering in conflicts that often involve exponential numbers of casualties (Fenton, Ut); the satirical edge that undercuts militaristic hyperbole (Höch, Spero); and a recourse to allegory as an

indirect and universalizing way of approaching subject-matter that challenges the limits of representation (Rubens, Picasso); amongst all these preoccupations, one of the most persistent remains the imperative to tell the truth about war. That imperative finds its most literal form in the indexical image, that is, the image created through physical contact with the thing it describes, which in this context refers most often, though not exclusively, to analogue photography.³ In some versions, the truth-claim is anti-art, as well as anti-war, in the sense that it repudiates any element of beauty, and distrusts processes of make-believe or interpretation that may interfere with the documentary qualities of the photograph. The controversy surrounding Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* (1936, illus. 4) is a case in point. Capa staked his reputation on his ability to get as close as any combatant to the moment of action, and to show us war as it really is ('if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough').⁴ The still-contested possibility that he may have staged his iconic image of a soldier at the moment of death has the potential to undermine the integrity of his oeuvre.⁵

Yet much anti-war imagery works more ambiguously in the no-man's land between art and documentary. It invokes the indexical truth-claim, but it is not limited to it. Rather, indexicality becomes one of several conditions of interpretation, a gesture toward a set of values, rather than a total commitment. The development of digital photography has brought the issue into focus, as Susan Sontag demonstrates in her analysis of Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) as a meditation on the gulf between combatants and civilians.⁶ As a composite image, Wall's photograph evokes a long association between peace protest and photomontage, which questions the underlying values that lead to war, by dissecting and

rearranging the apparently natural and homogeneous world of photographic reality.⁷ For example, Martha Rosler's *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* series (1967-72, reprised in 2004 and 2008) stages a confrontation between the ideal American home, and the foreign conflict on which it depends. She invokes techniques of visual protest developed by Dadaists such as Hannah Höch (*Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife*, 1919); and by Picasso in Cubist papier-collés such as *Bottle of Suze* (1912).⁸ As Picasso's first explicit statement against war, *Guernica* carries the trace of that early confrontation between the aesthetic preoccupations of a still-life composition, and the material reality of newsprint, in its grisaille tonality – a reference to the newspaper story that first reported on the massacre; and in the strips of paper that he attached to the painting, and then, dramatically, as part of the public performance of the making of *Guernica*, ripped away.⁹

The present essay explores these issues of authenticity and staging in anti-war imagery, with a view to questioning the documentary imperative that attaches to war photography. It tunes into a conversation amongst war artists and photographers that builds its protest incrementally, as well as through the shock of immediate encounter. In particular, the work of the photographer Don McCullin suggests ways of circumventing the antithesis between a direct, natural style of reportage, and the echo chamber of cultural reference. His description of his negatives as shreds of human flesh suggests an extreme form of photographic witness, more true relic than holy icon;¹⁰ but he also works knowingly within a visual tradition that layers his pictures with symbolic and metaphorical associations.

McCullin avers that he has only staged one photograph in the course of his 60-year career. He shot *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier and his Plundered*

Belongings (illus. 5), after he came across soldiers looting the body during the Tet offensive of 1968. But first he made an impromptu exhibition of the dead man's kit – his photographs, medical case and ammunition – which we see beside the corpse, in the foreground, as though fallen from the outstretched hand. 'I did it as a statement', McCullin tells us. 'I just thought it was important that this man's voice could somehow be heard.'¹¹ In explaining his intervention so straightforwardly, he differentiates himself from photographers whose stagings have been exposed ignominiously, by other people: Capa's putative fabrication of death in Spain; Alexander Gardner's practice of shifting corpses on the battlefields of the American Civil War;¹² or the poetic licence that Fenton may have taken with *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855, illus. 6), by scattering cannon-balls more thickly across a road in the Crimea. The expectation that war photography will revive, or at the least embalm, the first casualty of war, creates an atmosphere of moral disquiet around such fabrications.

McCullin's statement about the making of *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* authenticates his other work as factual. It also makes available the quality of artistry that is always, one feels, present in his photographs. He is open and articulate about this point too, although ambivalent. Blurring the distinction between the natural world and the museum, he defines his photographs as 'documents' that are motivated by and imbued with a sense of 'emotional commitment', rather than as:

untouchable works of art, to be hung on a wall. Even if they look like icons. It wasn't my fault if in Sabra and Shatila the light was almost biblical, if what happened in front of my eyes was like a scene out of Goya.¹³

His only intervention – and this admission gives him a great deal of latitude – is to choose and compose the shot, as he did in Vietnam when he saw an injured soldier trapped against a wall, and ‘recognised it immediately’ as a version of Christ’s deposition.¹⁴ The physical expression of extreme suffering follows a predictable pattern, he explains. Such configurations are bound to recur: ‘Like the attitude of women in the Middle East spreading their arms in distress, as in a Michelangelo. I did not have to be a Michelangelo to photograph them’.¹⁵

McCullin emphasizes that he staged *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* as an impulsive gesture of respect. He ‘shovelled’ the dead man’s possessions together, rather than carefully arranging them. In the moment and on the spot, the ‘statement’ was raw and unpremeditated, a cry from the battlefield, rather than from the studio. The ‘voice’ told a private history, inaudible in its detail, from which we can only infer a story of love, separation and final loss. Yet in itself, the image follows the same pattern of incorporation into a public tradition of iconographical reference that McCullin observes with his other work. In particular, it lends its voice to a debate about photography, time and death that has surrounded the medium since its very beginnings, and that links his work with that of other photographers, notably Fenton in the Crimea, as I shall explore below.¹⁶

McCullin’s gesture of respectful attentiveness to the soldier’s body, and the juxtaposition of the corpse with photographs of people taken when they were alive, have the effect of extending the soldier’s living presence beyond his recent death. In this context, the function of the photograph is not so much to transfix a moment of life, as to enact a variation on the rituals that imagine death as a process, a drifting

apart of body and soul, an unraveling of individual consciousness, rather than as a sudden disconnection. Such rituals take shape in extended funeral rites, and in the medical classification of the stages of grief.¹⁷ They appear also in the Victorian tradition of the post-mortem photograph, in which the newly deceased would be dressed up – sometimes literally propped up – and photographed in the bosom of their family as though still alive, before being committed to burial (illus. 7).¹⁸

In its composition and material qualities, *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* enacts such a family grouping. The consistency of tone and texture that McCullin achieves in his hand-developed silver-gelatin print has the effect of collapsing the distances of time and space that divide the people shown. It softens the difference of substance between the dead soldier and his photographs, between flesh and paper, reuniting him with his loved ones. The scene coalesces into an accidental tableau. The corpse seems to gesture toward the photographic portrait of a girl, almost central to the frame, who appears to return our look of curiosity. There is an air of complicity or deep understanding between them, in the way that they separately hold our gaze, direct and unsmiling, each with one hand resting toward the face. Below the girl, a half-dozen photographs are scattered over the medical kit, their subjects regarding us from different angles: two glamorous women seated side by side, a man smiling, a girl in white, other images indecipherable, half-forgotten. And there is the ghostly image of a woman, next to the girl at centre-frame and at right-angles to her, her face in three-quarter profile, the print so faded or over-exposed that we notice her last, if at all. She calls to mind another version of the post-mortem photograph, that is, the legend that photography can capture the spirits of the dead as they dwell among us. Her half-latent presence at McCullin's

improvised wake suggests the numerous images of spectres appearing in photographs of their own funerals, made out as nebulous outlines that might or might not be tricks of the light, or accidents of photographic processing.¹⁹

To the extent that *Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* is about touch, it affirms the indexical standard against which we intuitively measure war photography. The soldier is brought into renewed contact with his loved ones; McCullin handles the dead man's belongings in order to show them to us; the photographic technology makes a permanent impression, a sort of death mask – that classic example of an indexical image – of a body that will soon decay. It also calls into question the possibility of a direct encounter that photography seems to offer. *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* is full of faces which appear to look straight at us, but which by definition return nobody's gaze, not even McCullin's. The soldier's eyes are half-closed and unseeing. The girl in the central photograph might appear more alert than he, but, as McCullin encountered her, she is just as insensible, a scrap of paper developed by another photographer for a different audience, and shortly to disintegrate. There is no speaking intelligence in the picture, no palpable human presence, only the material trace of memories, and an instance of time suspended that has already slipped into the past.

This is not the 'moment of death' that we find in Capa's *Fallen Soldier*, or in Eddie Adams' *Saigon Execution* (1968), both of which take the idea of photographic timelessness to its limit, by capturing the instance at which time stops for the one who dies.²⁰ McCullin admires such work. His account of staging *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier* moves on to cite Adams as evidence that war photography can capture the 'ultimate disgusting truth of what happened that day'.²¹ But *A Dead*

North Vietnamese Soldier implies duration, through its inclusion of different moments from the soldier's life, and through its formal composition. I refer here to the drift of faces across the page, which rise one by one to our attention, as if through a process of recollection;²² and to the diminishing scale of the people shown, from the life-size body of the soldier that occupies the top half of the picture, through the enlarged head-and-shoulders photograph of the girl at centre, to the much smaller snapshot of the girl in white in the bottom left corner. A triangular pattern emerges from McCullin's random scattergraph of objects, one that suggests the triangle of perspectival recession as a description of distance travelled, whether through space or time.

The theme recurs in his *Road to the Battlefields: The Somme* (2000, illus. 8), a photograph that bridges the gap between McCullin's war photojournalism, and his late retreat to landscape and still-life subjects. His *Somme* is bare to the point of desolation. The sandy track recedes steeply, vanishing into a desert of grassland. A few trees mark the low horizon. Foreground detail dwells on the texture of wet, compacted sand on the road, matted grass on the verges, and the broken pattern of sunlight through clouds. The emptiness of the picture works like a vacuum to draw in multiple associations. The title implies a territory densely populated with the armies of the First World War, the horrendous conditions of trench warfare, and the massive casualties resulting from an offensive like the Somme. As with *A Dead North Vietnamese Soldier*, we look back from an obliterated present to a past where dead and living mingle together. McCullin's road likewise responds to the recurring image in the art of the First World War of a route through a landscape.²³ We see it crowded with men on the move in C. R. W. Nevinson's *Column on the March* (1915) and in

Paul Nash's *Men Marching at Night* (1918), or losing its way amid the bomb-craters of Nash's *The Mule Track* (1918, illus. 9). Nash is also present in McCullin's leafless trees, and in his dynamic cloudscape, which hints at the painter's sky-high, kaleidoscope explosions and blood-red sunsets; although, once again, it is an absence in *The Somme*, this time of colour, which reinforces a sense of its preoccupation with the past.

As a visual reference, the empty road in *The Somme* leads most directly to Fenton's *Valley*, and to the questions that it raises about authenticity in war photography. Fenton's picture records a particularly dangerous route through the battlefields of the Crimea.²⁴ He had wanted to capture a different, more strategically significant view of the road, but the site was blocked by shell-fire, so he 'very reluctantly [...] put up with another reach of the valley about 100 yds short of the best point.'²⁵ As Richard Pare points out, the barren quality that makes the photograph so archetypal, such a 'palimpsest' for subsequent images of war, was an inadvertent result of this sudden change of plan, much as McCullin argues that the aesthetic effects in his own photographs are an accident of situation.²⁶ Yet for some critics, the reticence of Fenton's most famous photograph betrays an unsavory artistry, a 'pictorialism which sits somewhat uneasily in relation to the appalling horrors of warfare' that he witnessed.²⁷ The sense here of a moral dichotomy between his 'elliptic and indirect approach', and the record of particular suffering that he could have made, conditions the debate about war art, but needs to be questioned. As Julian Stallabrass points out, the aesthetic in war photography may be discomforting, but it is impossible to disentangle from the documentary, because a quality such as clarity is both 'an aid to grasping particularity, and also unavoidably

an aesthetic quality.’²⁸ My speculation here is that the aesthetic can be a necessary, as well as an ‘unavoidable and perilous’ quality; that it has the capacity to intensify, rather than to weaken, a protest against war.

For Fenton’s critics, the problem with *Valley* lies not only in that which it withholds. In a letter to his wife, he describes how ‘the sight passed all imagination: round shot and shell lay like a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down, you could not walk without treading upon them’.²⁹ Some historians have argued that he doctored the scene to corroborate his experience, by rolling cannon-balls from the verges into the track, but it would be pointlessly anachronistic to accuse him of fraud, or of decadent attention to aesthetic effect.³⁰ The idea of a distinction between art as expression, and photography as documentation, had not yet emerged. Time and deliberation were built into the cumbersome, slow-moving photographic technology of the day. In the Crimea, Fenton made military portraits, panoramas, and tableaux of soldiers at camp which were clearly and necessarily staged for the duration of the shot.³¹ Admittedly, his work brought its mid nineteenth-century audience closer than ever before to a faraway conflict. For contemporary critics, the ‘palpable reality’ of his photographs exceeded any written report, not least because it was believed that he had ‘exposed himself equally with the combatants’ to enemy fire; but he could not have anticipated a later, extreme standard of heroic truth-telling.³²

McCullin offers another, more constructive form of anachronism, when he draws Fenton into conversation with images of subsequent conflicts. In company with Nash, McCullin himself, and more recently Paul Seawright (*Valley*, Afghanistan, 2002, illus. 10), the road becomes a universal image of the path to war, linking one

conflict to the next in an endless causal chain.³³ Fenton's chalky sky, which would have been whitened in the development process to contrast with the terrain, offers a blank canvas for artists who would go on to capture the turbulence of aerial conflict. The ground is sown with ammunition for a later harvest of casualties. McCullin, Fenton and Seawright enter into a discussion about the passage of time in the photographic moment, and about accidental effects of beauty in pictures that take on the subject of violent death. Nash speaks through McCullin of his determination to serve, not as an artist, but as a witness to war, and to brand those responsible – another form of indexical marking – with the 'bitter truth' of his message. Fenton's letters home reverberate through Nash's angry epistolary commentary on conditions for soldiers at the front. This is not to erase the historical specificity of the work, nor to ignore the actual instance of suffering that it records. But it is to broaden the debate about integrity in the context of anti-war art, and the expectations of accuracy that we might bring to different media. As McCullin discovered in the refugee camps of Beirut, the generic and the particular can be consanguineous, the one born of the other. Eye-witness images offer one version of the truth about conflict. Others emerge from their incorporation into the volatile, reiterative, and relentlessly expanding tradition of art against war.

¹ For a survey of art against war, see D.J.R. Bruckner, Seymour Chwast and Steven Heller, *Art against War: 400 years of protest in art* (New York, 1984); and Laura Brandon, *Art and War* (London, 2007).

² T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Egoist*, vi /4 (1919), pp. 54–5; and vi/5 (1919), pp. 72–3.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of indexicality has been widely applied to photography, as discussed by Tom Gunning in 'What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs', *NORDICOM Review*, v/1–2 (September 2004), pp. 39–49. Sculptural examples of indexical anti-war art include Rachel Whiteread's Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial, Vienna, 2000; and Stephen Hurst's castings of found objects from battlefields of the Somme, such as *Trench Still-Life*, 1990.

⁴ Capa's dictum is widely quoted, for example in Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa, a Biography* (London and Boston, 1985), p. 211.

⁵ Doubts were first raised by Philip Knightley in *The First Casualty* (New York and London, 1975), refuted by Richard Whelan in *Proving that Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' is Genuine* (*Aperture*, 166, Spring 2002), but affirmed by Manuel Susperregui in *Sombras de la Fotografía* (Leioa, 2009).

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, 2004; first published New York, 2003), pp. 110–13.

⁷ Alexander Alberro discusses what he calls 'the European Marxist tradition of montage as political critique' in 'The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the strategy of the decoy', in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher, exh. cat., Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and Generali Foundation, Vienna (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1998), p. 80.

⁸ On the debate surrounding the politics of Picasso's cubist collage, see Patricia Leighton, 'Cubist anachronisms: Ahistoricity, cryptoformalism, and business-as-usual in New York', *Oxford Art Journal*, vii/2 (1994), pp. 91–102.

⁹ Robin Greeley, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2006), pp. 147–87. When Picasso removed the strips of paper, spectators broke into applause.

¹⁰ Sean O'Hagan, 'Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin', www.theguardian.com, 7 February 2010.

¹¹ Don McCullin, 'The Art of Seeing', www.theguardian.com, 15 November 2012.

¹² Frederic Ray, 'The Case of the Rearranged Corpse', *Civil War Times*, iii/6 (October 1961), p. 19. Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New Haven, CT, 2013), pp. 96–8.

¹³ McCullin, 'The Art of Seeing'. Frank Horvat, interview with Don McCullin, August 1987, in *Entre Vues*, www.horvatland.com, accessed 8 September 2015.

¹⁴ Don McCullin, *Shaped by War*, exh. cat., Imperial War Museum, Manchester and London (London, 2010), p. 82. The photograph was *U.S. Marines, the Citadel, Hue*, 1968.

¹⁵ Horvat, *Entre Vues*.

¹⁶ On the relationship between photography and death, see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), where she states that 'photography is the inventory of death' (p. 72); and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981).

¹⁷ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (New York, 1969).

¹⁸ Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London, 2011).

¹⁹ Fred Gettings, *Ghosts in Photographs: The Extraordinary Story of Spirit Photography* (Montreal, 1978). John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London, 2007).

²⁰ For an analysis of images of the moment of death, see Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How news images move the public* (New York, 2010).

²¹ McCullin, 'The Art of Seeing'.

²² On the relationship between photography and memory, see Julian Stallabrass, 'Not in Our Name', *Art Monthly*, 293 (February 2006), pp. 1–4.

²³ Paul Gough, 'The Avenue at War', *Landscape Research*, xviii/2 (1993), pp. 78–90.

²⁴ The place was known to the troops as the 'valley of death', in reference to Psalm 23. Fenton's title also invokes Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', published four months earlier in December 1854, with its pride in the bravery of British soldiers at the Battle of Balaklava, and indignation at the military blundering that sent them to their deaths.

²⁵ Roger Fenton, letter to Grace Fenton, 24 April 1855, *Roger Fenton's Letters from the Crimea*, <http://rogerfenton.dmu.ac.uk>, accessed 8 September 2015.

²⁶ Richard Pare, 'The Artist's Eye', in *All the Mighty World: The Photographs of Roger Fenton, 1852–1860*, ed. Gordon Baldwin, Malcolm Daniel, and Sarah Greenough, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New Haven, CT, 2004), pp. 221–30, p. 225.

²⁷ Mark Durden, '“The Poetics of Absence”: Photography in the 'Aftermath' of War', in *Paul Seawright: Hidden*, by Paul Seawright, exh. cat., Imperial War Museum, London (2002), np.

²⁸ Julian Stallabrass, 'The Power and Impotence of Images', in *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images*, ed. Julian Stallabrass (Brighton, 2013), p. 52.

²⁹ Roger Fenton, letter to Grace Fenton, 4–5 April 1855, *Roger Fenton's Letters*.

³⁰ Errol Morris gives a detailed account of the debate surrounding the authenticity of Fenton's photograph in "Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?", in *Believing is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography)* (New York, 2011), pp. 3–71.

³¹ For a reappraisal of Fenton's work in the Crimea, see Baldwin, Daniel, and Greenough, eds, *All the Mighty World*.

³² Anon., 'Photographs from Sebastopol', *The Art Journal* (1855), p. 285; and anon., 'Minor Topics of the Month', *The Art Journal* (1855), p. 266.

³³ My point here is anticipated by Richard Grant, who links Fenton's 'aesthetic of reduction' to Nash, Nevinson and Seawright in his article 'A Terrible Beauty', *Tate Etc*, 5 (Autumn 2005), <http://www.tate.org.uk>, 1 September 2005). In '“The Poetics of Absence”', Durden observes that Seawright's photographs from Afghanistan 'stand somewhat out of time, haunted by the legacy of imperialist images or past images of war', particularly Fenton's *Valley*.